

Living with Headaches

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After more than a dozen years of hiatus, my headaches returned. But this time around, there is a big difference. I think I can now live *and* die with headaches. How? To explain, I need to go back to my earlier days.

When I was younger, I had headaches probably several times every month, usually toward the end of a busy day. I relied on Tylenol, which worked very well. So, I always carried a small container of Tylenol pills. And I felt the situation was under control. But when I got pregnant, I came to a new realization. I became serious about another individual in my body.

I had been eating a lot of junk foods. I had been drinking coffee all the time. But for a healthy development of my baby, I figured that all these needed to change. Once I started a healthier diet, my headaches were pretty much gone. A surprise. I didn't need to take Tylenol any more. This went well with my new commitment to avoid all forms of medications. Although I was still taking dietary supplements during my pregnancy, once my son was born, I stopped them as well.

So, thanks to my son, I started to live a much healthier life style. In addition, after my son started his kindergarten, I started to practice meditation. It worked for me. There were benefits on many fronts. For example, it worked for my anxiety. When I had a lot of headaches, I constantly worried about suffering from and even dying from headaches. The anxiety made the situation worse. Even when my headaches were under control with Tylenol, I woke in the middle of night with an anxiety and could not easily go back to sleep.

The lack of sleep, in turn, caused more headaches the next day. As a result, I needed more Tylenol.

However, after years of meditation practice, my anxiety diminished. It was not easy and involved a lot of effort. My friend, Sonia, who happens to be a psychologist and experienced meditator helped me in many ways. For the first year or so, I just sat for about twenty minutes a day and tried to pay attention to the breath. It was so-called “mindfulness” meditation. Gradually, I gained more concentration and became more mindful of my own body, thoughts, and emotions. I felt that I achieved a level beyond popular mindfulness bandwagons advertise. Sonia used to tell me, “Sybil, dreams and thoughts aren’t that different. When you understand what this *really* means, you have a pretty good grip of your own mind.” By the way, you can read more about what Sonia talked about. There is another piece of work titled *Dream vs. Thought* available on this web site.

Eventually, I got there. My meditation practice let me understand how my mind works. Very cool. Eventually, my anxiety basically disappeared. I can now notice when anxiety starts (or tries to start) and then, I can just let it go. I no longer need to be overwhelmed by it. The same is true for fear and virtually all other negative emotions. This includes the fear of the *process* of dying. Although I was not that afraid of the state of death by itself, I had been terrified by the process leading there. With meditation, this changed drastically. It took years but I think I am now much more comfortable facing my own death.

In this connection, I also came to the following realization: “Life is neither short nor long. It has exactly the right duration.” Please don’t misinterpret this statement. I am not a determinist. I do not justify premature deaths due to unfortunate circumstances. I do feel the pain and suffering associated with deaths in all forms. My realization is that when a death happens, it is the consequence of a complex cause-and-effect scenario. While it is natural and inevitable to experience pain and suffering associated with a death, it is not productive to be destroyed by the *attachment* to our expectations. In reality, my life may end at any moment for a variety of reasons. That will be my life. Neither less nor more. If we think of life this way, we are always dying and being reborn at every moment. This is how I interpret the notion of “rebirth” discussed in the Buddhist literature.

Also during this time, my perception of modern medicine changed considerably. My brother, Jack, had a medical procedure. But there was an incredible human error, which almost killed him. Around the same time, my very old grandmother went through a supposedly life-sustaining medical procedure. However, this caused unnecessary suffering to her and her relatives. In addition, I’m completely fed up with the current situation surrounding medicine. Medical, business, and political establishments are taking advantage of, say, the oppressed people. All these made me re-think about the modern medicine. Now, I no longer want to rely on any medical procedure to sustain my life. Instead, I want to depend solely on my innate healing ability. I know that there will be limits. But so be it.

You remember that I have a son. Now, he is a high schooler. Then, you may well think that I am irresponsible for potentially not doing my “best” in terms of medical intervention. You may say that such a procedure could save my life. Of course, I will not intentionally abandon my son. I will do *my* best. But when the time comes, I will simply accept it.

It was after all these changes within me when my headaches returned. Headaches started all of sudden for no apparent reasons and are going on for weeks. Luckily, my headaches are just moderate, not really severe. If I’m focusing on something, I can forget about them. Also, they are on and off, not constant. The timing I feel them most is when there is a change in my body position. Then, the pain would last for a while. Since I learned this pattern, I tend to be more sluggish, to avoid the pain. Also, if I change my position in the middle of night, this causes a headache that can certainly disturb my sleep.

Certainly, the return of headache is disappointing. But I am not taking Tylenol. I haven’t explored the Internet for possible causes and cures. I haven’t been to a medical facility either. Whenever I feel pain, I pay close attention to it. I don’t try to eliminate it. Instead, I just monitor it closely. The pain is there, but its strength and quality change from a moment to another. Eventually, the pain subsides after a while. If it doesn’t? So far, I haven’t experienced that yet. So, I don’t really know. But I will continue to pay attention to my headaches. This is the way I live with headaches. And what about if my headaches get worse and even fatal? Then, that will be my way of living *and* dying with headaches.

I was thinking that this was the end of this story. But last night, I had a strange dream. In the dream, I suspected that my husband was seeing a woman I don’t know. I confronted him and during our conversation, he accidentally admitted his action. Well, when I am awake, I never have such a suspicion. At least, I never thought so. But dream can be telling. Would it be possible that I have been unconsciously suspecting my husband? Would this be somehow related to my headaches? Are there any other unconscious mental activities that might be somehow related to my headaches? I don’t know. I don’t know what would happen to my headaches either. The only sure thing seems that my headaches are just one of many manifestations of all the events causing all the effects. My headaches make me pay attention to all those. And this makes my life more alive and precious. In this sense, my headaches might actually be a gift.